

ALTERNATIVE FOOD NETWORKS IN TIMES OF CRISIS: A DIALECTICAL CO-CONSTRUCTION PROCESS

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Abstract. *This article places itself within a debate that has developed over the past few years around alternative food systems. By combining insights from Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) literature, among the contemporary economics and social crisis, this paper would show how AFNs are evolving in the Global World. It will be displayed how - and in which way - the economic crisis has been shaping AFNs initiatives, which seem to be more developed after 2008, in both Global North and Global South. To reach these goals, data collected in two different contexts – Italy and Brazil - will be compared as follows: firstly, it will be presented the diachronic evolution of AFNs initiatives for each case-study, then, following a qualitative approach, it will be analysed the crisis impact.*

Keywords – Alternative food networks, social movements, economic crisis.

Introduction

Food is becoming an increasingly disputed issue, and food movements have emerged both in the global south and the global north (Morgan, Marsden, & Murdoch, 2008). The agro-industrial food system presents environmental, social and economic costs that are often borne by local communities. What has been labelled by the international literature as AFNs (Renting, Schermer, & Rossi, 2012), seems to be considered as part of Sustainable Community Movement Organizations (Forno & Graziano, 2014), which are resisting toward the mainstream food system creating alliances among different actors. AFNs are non-conventional channels of food distribution, which connect producers and consumers, promote a new concept of ‘food quality’ that respects local economy productions and eating traditions, sustain social development and business relations based on trust and community engagement (Venn *et al.*, 2006). At the same time, the economic and social crisis has been affecting the global world (Stiglitz, 2009). The crisis appears structural and multidimensional (Castells *et al.*, 2012), and it has been influencing individuals in their every-day life, but at the same time it has created new opportunities, especially for relatively young people.

This research would investigate whether the crisis affects Italian and Brazilian AFNs and the related degree and reasons of possible influences toward this kind of initiatives.

Methods

To reach the above-mentioned goals, the aim of this research project is firstly to compare AFNs initiatives in two specific contexts, thus a medium-sized city in Italy (Bergamo), and another one in Brazil (Florianópolis). The two contexts have been selected considering a series of variables:

- 1) Dimension: The two contexts have approximately the same population (1 million people) and similar territorial extension 2.500 km² for the Grande Florianópolis and 2.700 km² for the Province of Bergamo .
- 2) Presence of activities (AFNs): in both territories AFNs are numerous and increasing.
- 3) Role of Universities: crucial in both contexts.

The research plan was divided in two separated steps: I. the 'pilot-work', for collecting environmental and historical useful knowledges to better understand how and what could be investigated, especially in Brazil (January-March 2017) II. the field-work, for collecting data regarding both AFNs evolution, and information on farmers involved in AFNs (June-December 2017). Hence, the research design is resumed as follows:

Research Step	Research Method	Province of Bergamo	Micro-region of Grande Florianopolis
Pilot Work	Environmental data collection and preliminary interviews	14 in-depth interviews with AFNs' producers 11 of them → video-taped for a short movie about Short Food Supply Chain in Bergamo.	- 1 collective interview with an Ecovida's group of producers - 2 in-depth interviews with the boos of a supermarket and a couple of family farmers' - 4 video-taped interviews with producers - confidential interviews with volunteers, producers, group of fishermen, and activists - Ethnography in 4 four farmers' markets, 2 organic supermarkets
Field-Work	In-depth interviews	14 in-depth interviews. All interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim.	14 in-depth interviews. All interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim.
	Semi-structured interviews	25 semi-structured interviews with AFNs' farmers. All interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim.	25 semi-structured interviews with AFNs' farmers. All interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed verbatim.

Table 1. *Research design*
Source: *Elaboration by the author.*

For this article, data collected through the AFNs mapping, in-depth interviews with key observants, and the preliminary data analysis from the semi-structured interviews with farmers - in both case-studies - will be used, considering variables related to the economic crisis impact.

Preliminary findings

Geographically, AFNs are located along the urbanized area in both contexts, even though the physical structure of the cities is different. What emerged in both contexts is that AFNs are increasing despite economic and social crisis. In the Italian case study, it emerged that the SPGs remarkable growth has slowed down notably around 2010. On the other hand, since mid-2000s, other

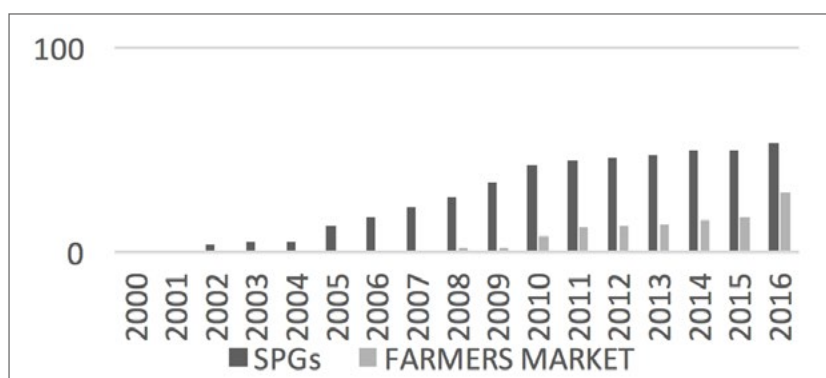


Figure 1. *AFNs in Bergamo.*
Source: *Elaboration by the author.*

forms of AFNs appeared, such as farmers' market (almost 30 in 2016), food assemblies, multi-functional farms, and so on (see Maurano & Forno, 2017). Moreover, since 2007 the citizen solidarity economy network (Sustainable Citizenship) has been created, which is playing a central role in spreading AFNs practices, being also involved with the local administration within the Agriculture Round-Table, a sort of a Food Policy Council.

In Brazil, as well as Italy, AFNs have been springing out. Contrary to Bergamo, where consumers' initiatives were pioneers, in Florianopolis, the first AFN initiative (a farmers' market) was implemented within the University, thanks to researchers and Cepagro NGO that have involved local producers belonged to Rede ECOVIDA, one of the most important solidarity economy network in the World. The Federal University is directly playing a central role to spread AFNs initiatives like SPGs. In Brazil, just along the last years, consumers' initiatives (6 SPGs and 3 Community-Supported Agriculture, CSAs) are surfacing, while farmers' markets are already structured in several parts of the urban area (13 farmers' market mapped).

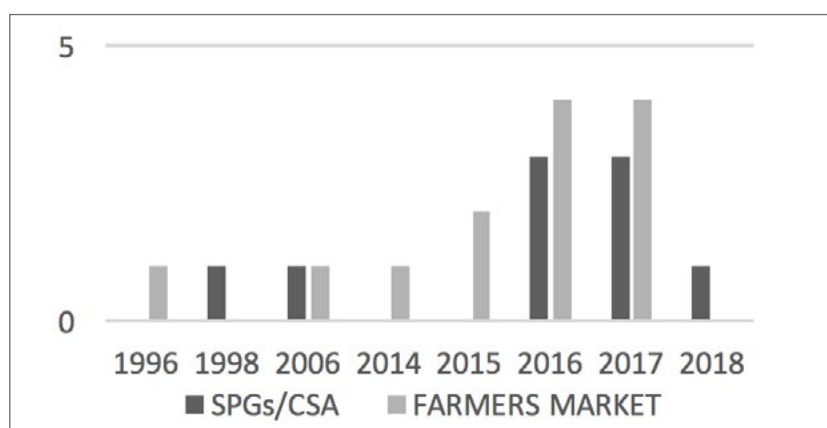


Figure 2. AFNs in Florianopolis.
Source: Elaboration by the author.

However, the political crisis in Brazil has been deeply affecting the everyday-life:

Political crisis is extremely negative: we are living in process where people don't what will happen. They are removing all rights. They are stopping all the achievements of the last years. Just in agriculture, one of the first decision of the coup was destroying the Minister of Rural Development (Actor n. 21, Florianopolis)

Nevertheless, in both contexts there are more young people who are going back to the farmland (32/50 farmers interviewed are born after the 70s), testifying opportunities offered by both economic crisis (15/19 activities started after crisis are leaded by people born after the 70s), and by growing demand for organic (or at least, more sustainable) products.

Discussion and conclusion

In Italy AFNs appear to be fostered mainly by the activism of consumer-actors (see Guidi & Andretta, 2015) being the strong presence of SPGs within the metropolitan area. What previous researches - and this one - have demonstrated is that the economic crisis, the impoverishment of the middle class, and the greater citizen awareness on economic, social and

environmental sustainability issues have shaped the form of development of this type of collective action (Maurano & Forno, 2017). Contrary, in Brazil, AFNs are mostly encouraged by the Rede ECOVIDA and University's engagement. What emerged is that economic crisis has not been affecting AFNs initiatives yet, which are increasing. Most interviewed people have confirmed the idea of Castells et al. (2012): current economic crisis offers opportunity to develop alternative practices among the urban (and peri-urban) landscape, especially highlighting the direct engagement of relatively young people. However, the consumers' awareness is still weaker, and more focused on their own health, rather than Italy. It explains why Brazilian AFNs are mainly built by local producer organizations. Finally, political and social crisis appears to be more rooted and worrying, but it should also be observed together with future economic trend, to assess its impact.

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